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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses issues and challenges in providing English language instruction to Latino and other linguistically diverse (LCD) incarcerated youth, aged 16-24, suggesting best practices and models to provide this intervention in correctional settings. It focuses on th following: the rationale for instruction (the instruction that LCD youth receive in correctional facilities may be the first positive learning experience in their lives); issues affecting incarcerated youth (disconnection, parenting, and mismatch of facility and educational goals); issues specific to LCD incarcerated youth (e.g., limited English proficiency and cultural knowledge and interrupted or inadequate education); factors to consider when designing programs (provide students with a learning environment built on mutual respect, implement a variety of motivational strategies, develop literacy skills through a balanced approach that combines basic skills instruction with functional uses of literacy, support native language literacy development, promote family literacy, and offer a variety of educational programs); and transitional programs (programs should include specific academic and transitional components and support services after release in order to succeed). (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education.) (Contains 12 references.) (SM)

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English Language Instruction for Incarcerated Youth

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English Language Instruction for Incarcerated Youth

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Between 1983 and 1991 the percentage of Latino youth in detention increased by 84%, as compared to an 8% increase for white youth and a 46% increase for youth overall (Hamparian & Leiber, 1997). This digest discusses the issues and challenges in providing English language instruction to Latino and other linguistically and culturally diverse (LCD) incarcerated youth ages 16–24 and suggests best practices and models to provide this intervention in correctional settings.

Rationale for Instruction

Although few studies have been conducted on this population, research suggests that education has a positive effect on the prison population in general and incarcerated youth in particular. Data on 3,200 inmates released from prisons in Maryland, Minnesota, and Ohio in 1997 and 1998 were reported in a longitudinal study (Steurer, Smith, & Tracy, 2001). Recidivism—returning to the correctional system—was 29% lower for inmates who had participated in correctional education programs than for nonparticipants. Similarly, data from the National Adult Literacy Study (NALS) indicated that the 80% recidivism rate was reduced by 20% or more when incarcerated youth were involved in reading instruction programs (U.S. Department of Education, 1992).

Issues Affecting Incarcerated Youth

Along with the general developmental and cognitive needs of adolescent youth, issues specific to incarcerated youth include the following:

- ***Disconnection***. Many incarcerated youth enter correctional facilities feeling "mistrustful, in danger, out of control, disempowered, and disconnected" (Hudson River Center for Program Development, 1996, p. 7). Youth confined in adult facilities face a greater risk of suicide and physical and sexual abuse than those confined in juvenile facilities (Redding, 2000)
- ***Parenting***. A recent study in New York State indicates that 70% of all their incarcerated youth are parents. The study also showed that a majority did not practice safe sex and had substance abuse issues (Hudson River Center, 1996).
- ***Mismatch of facility and educational goals***. Because correctional facilities are responsible for the inmates' safety as well as for providing work and educational programs, security issues take precedence over access to educational programs (Taymans & Corley, 2001). Classes can be cancelled at the discretion of the correctional facility. Students may have access to books and notebooks only inside the classroom, and use of technology can be limited. Space is also limited within correctional settings, and it may not be feasible to group students according to language or literacy level. Limited time is another concern, as is absenteeism: Movement within the facility and transfer to other facilities, court dates, probation, and attorney and family visits often restrict learner participation in educational programs (LoBuglio, 2000).

Issues Specific to LCD Incarcerated Youth

Incarcerated LCD youth may face additional challenges of limited English proficiency and cultural knowledge and interrupted or inadequate education. Civil war, oppressive governments, and economic strife are motivating factors for emigration, and students who come from these backgrounds are often far behind their native-born peers in education (Collier & Thomas, 2001). In the Suffolk County (New York) Correctional Facilities, 100% of the LCD incarcerated minors had literacy levels below a fourth grade equivalent in English and 90% had literacy levels below an eighth grade level in their native Spanish (Hudson River Center, 1996). Programs for youths usually focus on GED preparation and require a level of English many LCD youths have not yet achieved.

Factors to Consider When Designing Programs

Although statistics are not available for LCD youth, some have learning disabilities that make traditional schooling frustrating. The frequency of learning disabilities among all incarcerated individuals has been estimated at between 30% and 50%, compared to 5% to 15% among the general adult population (National Adult Literacy and Learning Disabilities Center, 1999). As with all instruction for youth and adults—especially those with low literacy levels—educational programs that tailor instruction to reflect learners' goals are more likely to be effective. Educators Collier and Thomas (2001), Egbert (1989), and Sherman (2002) suggest the following when designing programs:

- Provide students with a learning environment built on mutual respect. For example, ask learners from different cultures to give oral or written presentations about their culture to the other students. Kristin Sherman (2002), a prison educator in North Carolina, had her students give a presentation on Latino culture to detention officers.
- Implement a variety of motivational strategies. Use computers. Provide gifts for good effort: This can be meaningful to students who have nothing of their own and feel stripped of their identity in the correctional facility. Paper, envelopes, and dictionaries are inexpensive and convenient.

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- Develop literacy skills through a balanced approach that combines basic skills instruction (such as decoding skills and writing practice) with functional uses of literacy (such as reading labels, letter reading, and critical evaluation). Magazine and newspaper articles, audio and video recordings of news stories and documentaries, music, photographs, and maps are high interest, authentic materials.
- Support native language literacy development where possible. Research on LCD children and youth suggests that skills developed in first language literacy are critical for achieving second language literacy. (Collier & Thomas, 2001). Provide reading and listening materials as well as counseling in the student's native language. The GED test is available in Spanish and French; this might be an option for those LCD youth with higher literacy in their native language.
- Promote family literacy through lessons that model parenting and interactive literacy activities that students can replicate during visits from their children. Have LCD parents practice reading children's books, eventually record a story, and send the book and tape to their children. While youth are being educated on issues of parenting and family literacy, their English skills are enhanced using the less challenging vocabulary, repetition of structures, and highly contextualized format of children's books.
- Offer a variety of educational programs. For example, youth in the Suffolk County Correctional Facilities participate in English literacy/civics classes; Even Start or other family literacy programs for minors who are parents; literature classes; computer skills and computer graphics classes; English as a second language (ESL) life skills classes; and employment workshops on identifying skills, resume writing, and interviewing (Hudson River Center, 1996).

Transitional Programs

Strong transitional programs can facilitate continued success upon release from prison. In data collected from the New York State Education Department's Incarcerated Education Transition Program, a program administered in county jails since 1988, recidivism was reduced when incarcerated youth participated in a three-level program:

1. *Academic components*—ESL; adult basic education (ABE); GED; high school tutorial; career, family, and life management; vocational education; and family literacy
2. *Transitional components*—computerized career assessments, job readiness skills, decision-making skills, community support, and parenting
3. *Support services after release*—employment; continuing education; higher education; social, health, and other services; family connections; and drop-in centers

The number of hours of exposure to the transition program was correlated with lower recidivism, greater involvement in educational program participation, increased employment outcomes, and a greater likelihood of being engaged in family and parental responsibilities. Participation in the transition program resulted in 75% fewer repeat offenders than in the statewide comparison group (Hudson River Center, 1998).

Conclusion

The instruction that LCD youth receive in correctional facilities may be the first positive learning experience in their lives. Placing students on a path of learning and literacy development by implementing the strategies offered here can help them establish a life pattern of success.

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